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SUBJECT: CATHOLICS PROTEST GVN ACTION, POLICE SEIZE LAND AT THAI HA PARISH

REF: HANOI 1086

¶1. (SBU) SUMMARY. The standoff between Catholic parishioners and the Hanoi city government continued to escalate over the weekend, as the Hanoi Archbishop led a special mass at St. Joseph's Cathedral attended by 12,000-15,000 and the state-controlled media continued to attack the Archbishop. Construction of a public park and library at the former residence of the Papal Nuncio went forward with the apparent blessing of PM Dung, while across town, local authorities raided disputed property near the Thai Ha parish. Meanwhile, the MFA spokesman denied the beating of the AP Bureau Chief and claimed that the journalist had broken the law in attempting to photograph Friday's prayer vigil. END SUMMARY.

ARCHBISHOP HOLDS MASSIVE MASS...

¶2. (SBU) Following the events of Friday, September 19 (reftel), the Archdiocese of Hanoi on Saturday continued its large prayer vigils, as construction workers continued to tear down buildings surrounding the former Papal Nuncio's residence and moved forward with the rapid construction of a public park. Poloff estimated the crowd to be well over a thousand. Unlike Friday, when it appeared that the city government was leading the government's efforts to transform the disputed property, on Saturday, state-controlled media reports highlighted that Prime Minister Dung's had personally signed off on plans to turn the property on Nha Chung Street into a public park.

¶3. (SBU) On Sunday, September 21, Archbishop Joseph Ngo Quang Kiet conducted a special mass at Hanoi's St. Joseph's Cathedral, attended by nearly 100 priests and three bishops from outside Hanoi, in which he pointedly mentioned the persecution of the early Saints in Rome. Poloff and contacts at the mass estimated that at least 5,000 persons were packed into the Cathedral. Despite heavy rain, some 7,000-10,000 additional parishioners filled the square outside the Cathedral and surrounding streets. Following the mass, the Archbishop, bishops, and priests resumed their vigil near the disputed property, where the Archbishop again read his public letter to the President and Prime Minister criticizing the government's actions.

¶4. (SBU) The vigil continued at the site Monday morning, but in much smaller numbers, while the Archbishop departed Hanoi to attend an emergency meeting of the Episcopal Council in Dong Nai.

...AND MEETS CITY OFFICIALS...

¶5. (SBU) On Saturday, the Archbishop had an acrimonious meeting with the Chairman Nguyen The Thao People's Committee of Hanoi regarding the land dispute, according to priests close to the Archbishop. The Archbishop continued to press city officials to halt construction of the new public park and to return the land to the church. City officials asserted that the Catholic Church had no claim to the land and were adamant that the Archdiocese was breaking the law in pressing for continued prayer vigils at the site.

...BUT CONTINUES TO BE HARSHLY CRITICIZED

¶16. (SBU) Press reports following the meeting were overwhelmingly hard-hitting, with the state-controlled media attempting to characterize the Archbishop as unpatriotic by seizing on a statement in which he said the government's actions had made him "ashamed" to carry a Vietnamese passport when traveling overseas. The next day, the People's Committee of Hanoi issued a statement accusing the Archbishop of disturbing public order and undermining national unity. The statement, signed by Chairman Thao, threatened that if the Archbishop did not end his "illegal acts," he would be treated "in accord with the law."

MEANWHILE AT THAI HA PARISH

¶17. (SBU) Authorities also moved ahead to quell ongoing demonstrations at Thai Ha parish, the location of Hanoi's other prominent Catholic land dispute. Late Sunday evening (September 21), priests at Thai Ha reported that security forces and a "citizen brigade" had raided the property and destroyed the makeshift altar where parishioners had held vigil since mid August. The priests informed PolOff that police had driven them off the land and for a time had surrounded their church. According to the priests, an elderly Catholic woman looking after the Thai Ha property was missing and another woman beaten during the raid had required three stitches. Parishioners gathered at the church on the morning of September 22 to pray, but police had sealed the street near the disputed land.

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MFA DENIES POLICE BEAT AP CORRESPONDENT

¶18. (SBU) On September 21, MFA Spokesman Le Dung posted a statement on the Ministry's web site claiming that "there was no beating" of the Amcit journalist. The statement, however, asserted that the journalist had broken Vietnamese law "by deliberately taking pictures at a place where taking pictures was not allowed."

COMMENT

¶19. (SBU) The MFA's assertion is risible. Video footage, posted now on YouTube, shows the AP journalist being taken into custody. His clothes are clean and he is unharmed. Approximately a half hour later, he is seen and photographed (by DPolCouns, among others), still in police custody, with a laceration on his head and blood-soaked clothes. While we did not witness the Amcit being beaten, it is clear that he was suffered his wounds while in police custody.

¶10. (SBU) Developments at the former Nunciature residence and Thai Ha parish are more complicated, though the government's stance appears equally intransigent. After weeks of inaction and relative restraint, the authorities have likely concluded that they can no longer tolerate large-scale demonstrations and are now moving to permanently change the facts on the ground.

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